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THE BEST OF ALL WAYS

A ROMANTIC ADVENTURE IN ONE ACT

BY

JULIA FARRELL WHITELY

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PREFACE BY THEODORE B. HINCKLEY

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FOREWORD

The Playshop is a unique organization sponsored by the Drama Club of Evanston and the School of Speech of Northwestern University. The Drama Club is an institution many years old and numbers in its membership nearly a thousand representative women who are leaders in civic affairs, writers, lecturers, and non-professional persons who are intelligently interested in the theatre arts. The two groups, the Town and the Gown, have united to form a unit devoted to the building up of productive dramatic activity.

At the present time playmaking classes and lectures on modern drama are conducted at the Women's Club for the townspeople, and similar work is carried on at the School of Speech for the University students. To the former anyone, man or woman, interested in writing plays is admitted. To those qualified, University credit is given, but the majority of this group are taking the work with no thought of academic advancement. The fees for these classes are very small. The classes at the University conform in all matters to the regulations of other college classes. Plans have been drawn up for a completely equipped school of the theatre arts, to be situated in the town, which will house both divisions in the near future.

The playwriting classes are conducted in two-hour periods devoted to brief statements of the elementary principles of dramatic construction, to the considera-

tion of the plays being developed by the students and to an evaluation of current plays in the professional theatre. Plays of promise, from the embryonic state on, are given reading rehearsals so that the author may see them in action, the sure method of judging their carrying power to an audience.

Completed plays or acts are then taken over by the play producing unit made up of both the mature and the student groups. Productions are given before these groups, the plays are criticised by the combined classes, and if they are thought worth the effort, are then rewritten for final performance. If a play proves of value, it is given the last touches necessary and submitted to producers or to publishers.

This experience in the production of the plays not only allows the author to see his work actually before an audience, but as he follows the rehearsals it affords him training in the production and directing sides of the theatre, angles of view necessary to any successful dramatist.

In this brief preface to the plays, it is impossible to cover adequately the value of the productions to the students taking part in them. Each production is a "problem" for the production and the directing classes of the University, and in each the students have the opportunity of applying their principles or their theories on costumes, settings, pantomime, dance, or any phase of theatre art covered by the drama department.

The advantages of this plan are many. Mature writers are enabled to get training not offered elsewhere except to college students—and a large number of our better playwrights are not college trained. They are not made to feel out of place in a young group. But

more important is the value of the combined criticism of college students and those who are more experienced.

The student gets his technique quickly but frequently has little to express. The writer of experience has much to say but is slow in absorbing a feeling for the dramatic form. The criticism of the produced plays by the two sections is, therefore, highly stimulating and the elements represent rather fully the reactions of any better class theatre audience.

Individual writers in the classes have already published volumes of one-act plays. This series of Playshop Plays has been instituted to give the public the individual plays of value as they are created. Each number of the series has proved its value as an acting play before several audiences and has been voted upon by an important committee as of worth to producers of one-act plays.

It is the hope of the sponsors that this series will prove that creative dramatic work is greatly stimulated by the laboratory method of instruction and by the impetus each individual receives from contact with a body of earnest and cooperative associates.

THEODORE B. HINCKLEY.

CAST

SERGEANT TIM JOYCE, *age twenty-five, a cocksure Irish traitor, guard of the jail.*

AILEEN SHERIDAN, *age twenty-two, an Irish beauty, betrothed to Terrance Delane.*

BETTY SHERIDAN, *age eighteen, Eileen's pretty sister.*

TERRANCE DELANE, *age twenty-six, a Sinn Fein prisoner.*

SCENE: A cross-road in Ireland, before a jail gate in 1916. The gate, on each side, is flanked by a high buttressed wall. Inside the gate a lawn, kept with the exactness of governmental institutions, stretches back to a deep blue sky line, which gives the illusion of height.

TIME: LATE TWILIGHT OF A MID-SUMMER'S EVE.

THE BEST OF ALL WAYS

At the rise of the CURTAIN, TIM JOYCE, in English khaki, with musket at right shoulder, enters at the left, crosses and disappears. After a few minutes he re-enters at the right, crosses and disappears at the left.

AILEEN and BETTY SHERIDAN enter at the right. AILEEN is fearless and has the light of high determination in her eye. BETTY is shrinking and fearful. AILEEN has her arm about BETTY and urges her on.

AILEEN

'Tis the very gate at the Cross-roads, as I thought.

[She leaves BETTY and goes to the gate.

Yes, this is it.

BETTY

Oh, but you're brave.

[She comes to gate.

Is it sure you are this is where you were before?

AILEEN

It is good cause I have to remember the place. Wasn't it here I was in the rain all day chanting the Rosary, until they released father—and you home praying with mother?

BETTY

You've not been here since though.

AILEEN

I've had no cause, until they took Terrence from me. Now I am here to get him back, the same as I got father, only by a different method.

BETTY

Aileen, dear, is it no fear you have at all?

AILEEN

Fear, is it? Fear of what? Fear to be a patriot?

BETTY

Ay, but Terrence is a Sinn Fein patriot.

AILEEN

He is, thank God, or it's not here I'd be. It's *ourselves for ourselves*. It's what England and America rightly call patriotism. What was it Terrence was imprisoned for, I ask you, but applying the Monroe Doctrine to Ireland!

BETTY

You are right, darlin'. An act that is called patriotism in America, is called treason to England here, God knows why! But aren't you afraid the guard will suspect why you're sparking him?

AILEEN

No man ever suspects that a girl sparks him for any reason, save that she cannot resist him. Have no fear of that.

BETTY

Are you certain Terrence understands when to let himself down?

AILEEN

He does so, and the rope is fine and stout. I tested it myself. I'll give the signal now to see if he's watching.

[AILEEN puts her hand through the bars of the gate and makes a perpendicular movement and then crosses it horizontally. Both she and BETTY watch intently for a minute.]

AILEEN

Oh! What's happened?

[She waits another minute.]

There's the return! God love him!

BETTY

Sure. He's watching all right.

AILEEN

Now for the guard.

[She looks for him.]

BETTY

I fear the guard's anger if he finds out you're spoofing him. He may harm you.

AILEEN

A guard, children, never finds out anything. That's why he's a guard. As for harmin' me, he will be too busy admirin' the red of my lips to be thinkin' of anything else at all, at all.

BETTY

I wonder if I have the signals straight. 'Tis cold
I am with fear.

AILEEN (*coming to BETTY*)

I'll tell ye again to make sure. The first time I
sing, "The Best of All Ways—" is just to tell you
and Ted that I'm succeeding, so that Ted can get
the rope well fastened and be ready.

BETTY

What if the rope break?

AILEEN

God send ye faith in Him! Could He let a rope
break with Terrence at the end of it? Never!

BETTY

And the second time you sing, Terrence is to swing
out, God help him.

AILEEN

He is! And 'tis you who are to be God's instrument
and have the gate open.

BETTY

And the key?

AILEEN

That's for me to find out, the St. Bride helping me!

BETTY

'Tis quakin' I am with chills.

AILEEN

Hearten yourself with prayer, sister acushla: you
know this means more then life to me.

BETTY

I do, darlin'. Isn't it strange, after all the boys that sought ye, you should be promised at last to a Sinn Fein prisoner?

AILEEN

He's all in this world that I want.

BETTY

Isn't it the loyal heart ye are! What a lucky soul Terrence Delane is to be so loved.

AILEEN

Not so lucky as Aileen Sheridan who has him to love!

[SARGT. TIM JOYCE, *prison guard enters at the left.*
BETTY *shrinks against the gate post.* AILEEN *is looking down the road.*

JOYCE (*roughly*)

What are ye women doin' here about the jail?

AILEEN (*turns her radiant face over her shoulder upon him, then, as though blinded by his beauty, drops her eyes to the ground and shyly looks up from under dusky lashes—in melting tones*)

Oh! Isn't it the fright you gave me, Major.

JOYCE (*flattered by the "Major" and the open admiration*)

I'm sorry, but we allow no women around the jail.

AILEEN

Why, Major, can't ye trust yerselves?

JOYCE

It's the law.

AILEEN

Just because the men who made the law knew *themselves* were not to be trusted is no reason the rest of you should be suffering for their sins.

JOYCE (*looking from AILEEN to BETTY*)

Who are ye at all?

AILEEN

She's my sister, Betty Sheridan.

JOYCE

What are ye both doin' here?

BETTY

We're waitin' for our uncle who is to meet us here, and bring us home in the dusk from the fair.

JOYCE

A strange meeting place you've chosen before a jail gate.

AILEEN

'Twas our uncle chose it. Sez he: "You'll be safe awaiting me there; the guard of the jail is a chivalrous gentleman."

BETTY

That's what he said.

JOYCE (*inflated*)

Yer uncle knows me?

AILEEN

He hasn't that honor, Major, but your fame for chivalry has traveled the length and breadth of Ireland *over*.

JOYCE

'Tis stuffin' me ye are!

AILEEN

'Tis the truth I'm tellin' you.

[TIM *looks at* BETTY.]

BETTY

It is so, Major.

JOYCE

Well, truth or falsehood, law is law and you must move on.

BETTY

If we went now in the dark, it's miss our uncle we would, and we don't know the way.

AILEEN

He bade us wait him here. Won't you let us stay a few minutes, please, Major, so we won't miss him?

JOYCE

Well, 'twill do no harm to have ye wait a few minutes longer. Then, if he doesn't come, ye must go, sorry as I'll be to lose you. (*To AILEEN*) It's not often I have a beauty like you to be talkin' to in the moonlight.

AILEEN

Even if you had itself, it's not such as you would be tempted to neglect your duty.

BETTY

Our law is safe with such guards as you to protect it.

JOYCE

It's the truth you're tellin'. I've a high respect for me duty.

AILEEN

I'll warrant none escape this jail with you on guard.

JOYCE

If they try it, I soon pop them off.

BETTY

Isn't it the sure shot ye are!

JOYCE

Isn't it the little divil ye are! (*Pinching her cheek.*)

AILEEN

Wouldn't ye know from the cut of him, Betty, that he'd not fail in anything he set out to do?

BETTY

You would so. (*She looks to the left.*) I wonder uncle isn't here. Do you suppose anything could have happened him?

AILEEN

No, dear, he'll be along soon.

JOYCE

I wonder two such beauties as you are haven't comrades of your own to be seeing you home, instead of awaiting a mere uncle at a jail gate.

AILEEN

'Tis squads of boys we might have, if we weren't so particular, Betty and I.

JOYCE

What sort of man do you favor?

AILEEN

It's only a soldier, Major, in these hard days that would be worthy the notice of an honest girl.

JOYCE

I'm worthy enough, me beauty (*coming close to her*).

BETTY

I'll go down the road a bit to see if uncle is coming.

AILEEN

Do, dear, but don't be long.

JOYCE

Do, dear, but don't hurry back!

[BETTY *goes out*. *Left*.

So you think a soldier would be worth loving', do ye? (*Insinuatingly*) What kind of a soldier?

AILEEN

A strong, manly one who couldn't be hoodwinked by women. One like you, Major.

JOYCE

How do you know that I'm strong, girl?

AILEEN

I've not passed thus far through life with me eyes shut. I can read character when I see it.

JOYCE

A wise girl ye are. What might *yer* name be?

AILEEN

Aileen Sheridan it is.

JOYCE

Aileen! (*With appreciation*) It suits you, so it does. (*Taking her hand.*) Oh, the soft hand of ye. What a pity it is I'm on duty the night, else we could stroll down to the pool.

AILEEN

Oh, I'd love the pool, but what's a mere girl's wish to you compared with your duty. Isn't it the wonder you are to have strength of character and charm as well, all wrapped up in one small man.

JOYCE

I'm not small, girl.

AILEEN

You are small for all you contain. Small to me is always a term of endearment. It's not easy to find suitable ones for such as you.

JOYCE

Nellie O'Shea and Peggy Ryan do be rackin' their poor heads, tryin' to find love names for me! Mush that they are.

AILEEN

I don't wonder, Major! Though *you're* so modest, you've no notion of your own fascination.

JOYCE

No, I suppose not. (*The clock strikes the hour of nine.*) 'Tis time for the inside patrol, bad 'cess to it. You won't leave while I make it?

AILEEN

I couldn't if I would.

JOYCE

Of course ye couldn't, ye beauty. (*He puts arm about her and attempts a kiss.*)

AILEEN (*evading him*)

Not so fast, me lad! The night is still young.

JOYCE

You're right it is. Will you promise me one when I return?

AILEEN

Have faith in yerself, man. (*Sings.*) "The best of all ways to lengthen our days is to steal a few hours from the night, my dear."

JOYCE

God forgive you for a witch! (*Closing in.*)

AILEEN

Not a witch at all, lad (*putting him off*), only a girl who knows a man when she meets one.

JOYCE

If it weren't for the inside patrol where I have no help, I'd not make it at all the night.

AILEEN

You have help, I hope, on the *outside* patrol?

JOYCE

I have so. At the next gate (*pointing to the left*) is a patrol, a young clod with no imagination.

AILEEN

Ah! (*With a killing glance*) The difference in men!

JOYCE

I'll not go at all. I'll stay here with you. It's you need guardin' more than them inside safely.

AILEEN

Trust you to make the sacrifice for a girl! But I won't accept it. It's too kind ye are. Unlock the gate and take a look itself, inside, so they will have nothing on you anyway. I'll try to endure your absence.

JOYCE

Takin' care of my job for me, is it? The clever wife you'd make a man! Wait here. I'll cut it mighty short. (*Out of breast pocket he takes a long key with which he opens the jail gate. After locking the gate on the inside, he puts the key carefully back in pocket, waves AILEEN a kiss, which she rapturously returns, and disappears. AILEEN watches to see that he has gone.*) Wait for me, darlin'!

AILEEN

Betty! Betty!

[BETTY returns.

Could you see the aeroplane from the cliff? Could you see it, Betty?

BETTY

It's *there* below, though I could see its white wing only, gleaming in the moonlight.

AILEEN

For the love of God, Betty, tell Terrence to be on the alert for the guard at the south gate, or he'll never make the plane.

BETTY

How do you know there is one there?

AILEEN

The wise guard told me, but says he's a clod. God grant he's a clod like himself when Terrence passes.

BETTY

What success with himself?

AILEEN

It's cruel, it's so easy. If only I can keep my face, he's mine before the hour.

BETTY

Terrence said 'tis you can never fail, Aileen.

AILEEN

With God's help I won't!

BETTY

And the key to the gate?

AILEEN

The key is in the left-hand breast pocket of his blouse.

BETTY

Breast pocket! How will you get it then?

AILEEN

He must take off that blouse. (*She looks nervously toward the gate.*)

BETTY

What then?

AILEEN

He must leave blouse and gun here and go for a walk in the moonlight with me.

BETTY (*with chattering teeth*)

Then I—

AILEEN

Then you get the key from the breast pocket, sh—
(*She looks toward the gate.*)

BETTY

Why are you watchin' so nervously? Sure he has just started the inside patrol.

AILEEN

Started it is, but he is in such a flutter to get back that he will never stay to finish it.

BETTY

Will Terrence be ready so soon? We were to give you an hour and sure you've not had half that.

AILEEN

I gave Terrence the song signal. He is ready for his part; now we must do ours. Remember, the next time I sing, Terrence is to swing out on the rope, so for the love of God, have the gate open or we're all

lost. Don't lose time. No telling how long I can hold himself.

BETTY

I'll do it if my heart doesn't burst with fear. It's the singing that alarms me, not once only but twice. Aren't you afraid some one will hear and suspect?

AILEEN

Is it Irish you are at all, Betty Sheridan, to ask such a question? Sure and isn't it the most common thing in Ireland, of a midsummer night, for boys and girls to be singing and dancin' at the cross-roads?

BETTY

It is so. I'm unstrung! It's chilled to the marrow I am with fear.

AILEEN (*wrapping BETTY close in her arms*)

May the blessed Mother hearten you. Sh! You'd better be goin',—it might be himself returning. Go.

[BETTY runs off. AILEEN poses at the gate post anxiously. Shortly TIM JOYCE comes out, locks the gate and puts the key back in his breast pocket.

AILEEN

Wasn't it the long time you were gone, Major. Sure I thought it was never returning you were.

JOYCE

I knew you'd miss me, ye beauty, so I didn't half do the patrol.

AILEEN

'Tis you could never leave a girl yearnin' for ye, on such a night.

JOYCE

Come over here on this bank and we will rest for a bit.

AILEEN

Warm and tired I am from our long walk up the cliff.

JOYCE (*putting his arm about her and leading her to the right where they sit*)

O! the luck I'm in!

AILEEN

Isn't it the luck I'm in, that my uncle is delayed,— else I'd never have known what I missed.

JOYCE

What a night for lovin'! Sure, no man with a heart in him at all could be doing anything else this night.

AILEEN

It would be cruelty to some girl if he did.

JOYCE

I'm grateful to you, Aileen, for relieving my loneliness.

AILEEN

'Tisn't alone, often, a lady-killer like you can be, here in the moonlight. Now, is it?

JOYCE

The scullery maids from the Inn do come up and try their red hands on us, but it's never before I've had the luck to get your sort.

AILEEN

O! ye darlin'.

JOYCE

You, with your soft hands (*pressing them against his lips*) and yer white neck and yer red lips. (*He kisses her full on the mouth.*) Have ye ever been kissed like that before now?

AILEEN

Never! You're wonderful.

JOYCE

Have you a lover at all, or is it far away he is?

AILEEN

I'm closer to you this minute than I am to him.

JOYCE

Ye are so, and it's sorry I'd be for him if he appeared before us now.

AILEEN

Or behind, Major.

JOYCE

Quit jokin' me. Sure no one but the prisoners are behind, darlin'! It's too much wit ye have for the beauty ye are. (*He attempts a one-armed embrace, still holding the gun between them.*)

AILEEN (*shrinking*)

Isn't it set up I am, by the rival you're givin' me.

JOYCE

Rival? What rival have *ye*?

AILEEN

And you can ask that while holding cold steel between us, with your right hand, too.

JOYCE

Is it the rifle you mean? Sure, you must know our orders are never to let it out of our hands while we are on guard.

AILEEN

Such orders may be needed by the clod yonder, but what use has the likes of you for them? You who could grab your gun from the ground quicker than he could present his from the shoulder.

JOYCE

Quit yer arguing and give me a kiss, gun or no gun.

AILEEN

Not with that wicked death-dealer between us. It's go off it might.

JOYCE

How can it go off with no one to pull the trigger? Come, Aileen, darlin', I'm thirsty for your lips!

AILEEN

Slake yer thirst on the gun, if you won't give it up for me.

JOYCE (*laying gun on bank*)

There ye are, sweetheart; now are ye satisfied?

AILEEN

Now I'm terrified for *your* safety. It's slip it might and shoot you in the back! Put it over again the post, and then I'll reward you.

JOYCE

The post, is it? That's too far away should I need it.

AILEEN

What need have you of it, this night, and every prisoner sleeping as soundly as an unborn babe?

JOYCE

Maybe they are and maybe they're not.

AILEEN

Have any of this last batch tried to escape?

JOYCE

No, none of the last batch.

AILEEN

Of course not. They haven't the spirit! Besides, they know you for a dead shot. . . . My uncle will be here soon.

JOYCE

I suppose he will, bad 'cess to him! (*He puts the gun against the gatepost and returns to her.*) Now, darlin' (*AILEEN responds to his extended arms*).

AILEEN

That's better, acushla. Though it's hard tellin' are ye there at all behind that wad of a blouse.

JOYCE (*he lays his head on AILEEN's shoulder and looks up at the moon.*)

I pity ye, old man, with yer cold silver face wrapped up in a thick blue coat.

AILEEN

Maybe 'tis he pities you.

JOYCE

How could he, darlin'?

AILEEN

I'm thinkin' it's cold ye must be wrapped up in a thicker khaki coat.

JOYCE

Sure, this is a uniform—it's required.

AILEEN

I don't require it, with the buttons like sharp stones bruising me hands.

JOYCE

I'm sorry. (*Kisses her hand.*) We're under orders to keep guard in full uniform.

AILEEN

Only a fish-blooded man could stand this mattress (*putting her hands on his blouse*) on a hot July night.

JOYCE

It's court-martialed we are if we don't keep guard in full uniform.

AILEEN

It's not the guards at Kilbecanty who fear court martial, then, not they!

JOYCE

What do you know about the guards at Kilbecanty?

AILEEN

I know it's never a blouse they wear the whole summer through, but of course, they are warm blooded, young men!

JOYCE

Warm blooded is it!! Wasn't there warmth in me lips just now?

AILEEN

Of a sort, generated from the outside by the blouse! Look at the thinness of my gown, and I a frail girl only.

JOYCE

I'm a guard of the law and must obey it myself.

AILEEN

Fortunate you are that the law warms the ice water in your veins for you.

JOYCE

Ice water be damned!! I'll show ye, me proud beauty!! The guards at Kilbecanty are warm blooded young men, are they? (*He takes off the blouse and flings it on the ground.*) Tim Joyce will show them up. Now, Aileen, sweetheart, feel me heart beating for ye.

[AILEEN lets him take her in his arms and kiss her.]

AILEEN (*emerging from the long embrace with a sigh*)

Thief, it is you are, to steal a girl's heart from her bosom.

JOYCE

I'm giving you mine in its stead, my queen!

AILEEN

To think, only one short hour ago, I didn't know there was such a man as you in the world.

JOYCE

Are ye content with me now, love?

AILEEN

You are perfect, lad. It's the place only that's out of tune.

JOYCE

What do you mean, girl? Don't be so high faluting.

AILEEN

It would be heaven itself at the pool this night, with the moonlight flooding it with silver.

JOYCE

But I can't leave my post, save for the patrol.

AILEEN

And isn't it only a few steps beyond the patrol the pool is? Who'd ever know?

JOYCE

'Tis Eve ye are entirely!

AILEEN

'Tis a fine Adam you are! Was it on a public cross-roads Eve was kissed, yer thinking?

JOYCE

I'll lose me job if I'm found out.

AILEEN

Such as you can get a better job any day.

JOYCE

You could talk the head off my shoulders.

AILEEN

Put it on mine, acushla, by the pool. (*She kisses him ardently.*) Come, my love, come. (*As they go off, AILEEN sings:*

The young May moon is beaming, love,
The glowworm's lamp is gleaming, love,
The best of all ways to lengthen our days
Is to steal a few hours from the night, my dear.
[*They go off at the right.*]

BETTY (*after a few minutes, BETTY runs on, rushes to the bank and picks up the blouse. Then she rushes over to the gate and kneels before it. Tugging at the pockets, she looks through the gate.*)

There's Terrence in mid-air! (*Sobbing with fear she finds every pocket but the right one.*) Oh God, help me; where is it!! (*She looks again.*) He's nearly down! (*She tugs again*) He's on the sod!

TERRENCE (*at the gate*)

Betty, where are you? Unlock the gate in God's name!

BETTY (*finally finding the key*)

Sh—Terrence, I'm here. (*Inserts key, tugs laboriously at the gate but can't move it.*)

TERRENCE

Turn to the right, Betty, to the right!!!

BETTY (*Finally, with great labor, she turns the key and with the aid of TERRENCE they open the heavy gate.*)

There's a guard at the next gate. Creep by in the bushes, Ted.

TERRENCE

I will. God bless ye, Betty! (*He leaps into the road.*)

[AILEEN's voice is heard singing "The best of all ways to lengthen our days—"]

BETTY (*watching and praying, frantically*)

O! God, let him pass; let him pass; let him pass!
Oh, Mother of God, help him!! (*She leans against the wall for support, sobbing and praying. A shot pierces the night air. BETTY screams and runs to the left.*)

AILEEN (*running on at the right*)

Did they get him, Betty?

BETTY

I can't see him! I think they must.

AILEEN

Oh, Almighty God! (*She drops on her knees, crosses herself and prays.*)

JOYCE (*rushing on*)

Who fired that shot? Who opened that gate? (*He locks the gate, struggles into his jacket and looks for his gun. There is the sound of an aeroplane starting.*)

BETTY

There's Terrence leaping out of the bushes into the aeroplane. He's gone!

AILEEN

Thank God! Quick, Betty! (*They run out.*)

JOYCE (*Grabbing his gun he takes deliberate aim at AILEEN, who is off the stage.*)

No, you don't, you vixen! (*He fires.*)

[*There is a moment of tense stillness as he lowers his gun and waits. Then out of the moonlit night comes floating back AILEEN's laughing song:*

AILEEN

The best of all ways to lengthen our days, ha! ha!
Is to steal a few hours from the night, my dear.

CURTAIN

The Young May Moon, a fragment of which is sung in "The Best of All Ways," is to be found in *Familiar Songs*, compiled by Helen K. Johnson, published by H. W. Caldwell, N. Y., 1896. It may be found also in Moore's *Irish Melodies*, compiled by Sir John Stevenson, published by Oliver Ditson & Co., Boston, 1852.







